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ABSTRACT

Summarizing the findings of a longitudinal study of public and private schooling recently published, this paper provides evidence relevant to proposals that would either increase or decrease the role of private schools in American education. The authors specifically address eight premises that would increase the role of private schools and seven premises that would decrease their role. Those premises supported by the research findings include the beliefs that private schools produce better cognitive achievement and greater levels of self esteem and fate control among students than do public schools, that private schools provide a safer, more disciplined and ordered environment, that private schools are divisive along religious lines and do not provide as much educational range, particularly in vocational and nontraditional programs, and that facilitating the use of private schools through tax or school vouchers would decrease racial and economic segregation in private schools. Greater academic demands and a more ordered environment are identified as contributing to higher scholastic achievement in private schools. The report concludes that the research supports policies that would facilitate rather than constrain the use of private schools and that the present constraints on public schools impair their functioning without providing more egalitarian outcomes. (Author/WD)

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Summary of Major Findings

for

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

A Report to the National Center for Education Statistics
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This report is reproduced for participants in the April 7, 1981, seminar on "What Do We Know About Private Schools?"

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SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

One of the emerging policy questions in American education in recent years has been the question of the role that private schools should play. Although any answer to this question depends in part on values, it also depends on facts. First, how well do public and private schools work for children? Are private schools divisive, and, if so, along what lines? Are private schools more easily managed than public schools, and, if so, why?

Recent policy discussions concerning private schools in the United States have included both proposals that would increase their role in American education and proposals that would decrease their role. As an example of the latter, it has been proposed that private schools meet a racial composition criterion in order to maintain tax-exempt status. On the other side, there have been proposals for tuition tax credits for private schools, and, at the state level, proposals for educational vouchers.

These policy proposals are based in part on assumptions about the current roles and current functioning of public and private schools in America. The report is intended to provide evidence relevant to such proposals.

Using data collected in the first wave of the National Center for Education Statistics study, HIGH SCHOOL AND BEYOND, the report covers four major areas of interest in the public and private schooling issue: student composition within the public and private sectors (chapter 3), resources available in these schools (chapter 4), the functioning of

these schools (chapter 5), and the outcomes for students in the schools (chapter 6). The responses in 1980 from representative samples of approximately 58,000 sophomore and senior students in 1,015 public and private secondary schools, as well as their respective school officials, are used in the analysis. Catholic schools, which constitute about two-thirds of the total private sector, and other private schools are separately compared to public schools in the report.

Listed below are a number of the premises underlying policy proposals that would increase or decrease the role of private education in the United States. Following each of these assumptions is a brief summary of our relevant findings.[1]

Premises underlying policies that would increase the role of private schools:

1. Private schools produce better cognitive outcomes than do public schools.

The evidence from chapter 6 is that private schools do produce better cognitive outcomes than public schools. When family background factors that predict achievement are controlled students in both Catholic and other private schools are shown to achieve at a higher level than students in public schools. The difference at the sophomore level, which was greater for Catholic schools than for other private schools, ranged from about a fifth of the sophomore-senior gain to about two-thirds the size of that gain (i.e., from a little less than half a year's difference to something more than one year's difference). This evidence is subject to a caveat: despite extensive statistical controls on parental background, there may very well be other unmeasured factors in the self-selection into the private sector that are associated with higher achievement.

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[1]The points listed below constitute the body of the concluding chapter, chapter 7.

When we examined gains from the sophomore to the senior year in the three sectors, the first evidence was that students from comparable backgrounds make greater gains in other private schools than in public schools, but that students in Catholic schools do not. However, the much greater sophomore-senior dropout in public schools than in either the Catholic or other private schools shows that the apparent public school gains have a considerable upward bias, leading to the conclusion that greater cognitive growth occurs between the sophomore and senior years in both private sectors than in the public sector.

A caveat to all these results is shown by the high-performance public and private schools. Performance was much higher in both of these sets of schools, than in any of the three sectors (section 6.1), although these schools could not be separately studied in the extended analysis of section 6.2 because of ceiling effects in achievement scores.

2. Private schools provide better character and personality development than do public schools.

Little evidence on character and personality development was provided in this report. However, students in other private schools show both higher levels of self-esteem and fate control than sophomores and higher gains from the sophomore to senior year than students in public or Catholic schools. The inference that there is greater growth on these dimensions in other private schools is strengthened by the fact that students in high-performance private schools showed even higher levels as sophomores, and similarly high sophomore-senior gains, while students in high-performance public schools did not, despite the fact that the parental backgrounds of students in the latter schools are higher than those in other private schools. The fact that the other

private and high-performance private schools have less than half the student-teacher ratio than schools in the other sectors suggests that the difference might be due to this.

3. Private schools provide a safer, more disciplined, and more ordered environment than do public schools.

The evidence is strong that this premise is true. The greatest difference found in any aspect of school functioning between public and private schools was in the degree of discipline and order in the schools (sections 5.3, 5.4). The Catholic and other private schools appear somewhat different in their discipline and behavior profiles, with students in other private schools reporting more absences and class cutting, but also more homework, fewer fights among students, and greater teacher interest in students. However, in all these respects, both sectors showed greater discipline and order than the public schools.

4. Private schools are more successful in creating an interest in learning than are public schools.

There is little evidence to confirm or disconfirm this premise in the report. The sectors differ only slightly in student responses to the two direct questions concerning interest in school, and there is not much to be inferred from indirect evidence presented in the report.

5. Private schools encourage interest in higher education and lead more of their students to attend college than do public schools with comparable students.

The evidence on this premise is toward a positive answer, but it is not extremely strong evidence. There is some evidence that students have higher college aspirations and expectations in private schools than do students from comparable backgrounds in public schools (Table 6.2.). Students in Catholic schools show somewhat higher aspirations

than do students from comparable backgrounds in other private schools. The use of retrospective questions to show growth over a four year period produces evidence in the same direction (stronger and more consistently for the Catholic schools than for the other private schools) (Table 6.2.).

The report contains no evidence on this premise.

6. Private schools are smaller and thus bring about greater degrees of participation in sports and other activities than do public schools.

The evidence shows that this premise is true for other private schools, but not for Catholic schools (though Catholic school students report highest school spirit, and other private school students lowest); The fact that Catholic schools are smaller in size than public schools does not result in increased participation in extracurricular activities. In addition, participation grows between the sophomore and senior years in other private schools, while it declines slightly in Catholic and public schools.

7. Private schools have smaller class size, and thus allow teachers and students to have greater contact.

The other private schools have sharply lower student-teacher ratios than the public schools, while the Catholic schools have slightly higher ratios. There are fewer than half the students per teacher in other private schools than in public or Catholic schools (Table 4.2.1). No direct evidence on contact between students and teachers is presented.

8. Private schools are more efficient than public schools, accomplishing their task at a lower cost.

The report contains no evidence on this premise.

<u>Premises underlying policies that would decrease the role of private schools</u>:

1. Private schools are socially divisive along income lines, creaming the students from higher income backgrounds, and segregating them into elite schools.

The evidence on this premise works in two directions. First, among the three major sectors, the other private schools contain students from somewhat higher income backgrounds and the Catholic schools contain students from slightly higher income backgrounds than the puBLic schools. The differences are primarily at the highest and lowest income levels, with all three sectors having a majority of students in a broad middle income category ranging from $12,000 to $38,000 a year, and similar proportions at different levels within this range. Second, the internal segregation by income within each sector goes in the opposite direction, with the public sector showing slightly higher income segregation than either the Catholic or other private sectors. However, income segregation is not high within any sector. The end result of these two forces acting in opposite directions is that U.S. schools as a whole show slightly greater segregation by income than would be the case if private school students of differing income levels were absorbed into the public schools in the same way that public school students of differing income levels are currently distributed among schools.

2. Private schools are divisive along religious lines, segregating different religious groups into different schools.

The evidence is strong that this is true. Besides the 30 percent of private schools that are Catholic, enrolling 66 percent of all private school students, 25 percent of private schools, enrolling 12 percent of private school students, are affiliated with other religious denominations. Examining religious segregation solely in the Catholic/non-Catholic dimension, the report shows that the great majority of Catholics

are in public schools, but that over 90 percent of the students in Catholic schools are Catholic. Within each sector, the Catholic/non-Catholic segregation is least in the Catholic schools themselves, greatest in the other private schools. The overall impact of the between-sector segregation and the differing segregation within sectors is, as might be expected, that schools in the United States are more segregated along Catholic/non-Catholic lines than they would be if private school students were absorbed into the public schools.

3. Private schools are divisive along racial lines, in two ways: they contain few blacks or other minorities, and thus segregate whites in private schools from blacks in public schools; and the private sector itself is more racially segregated than the public sector.

The evidence shows that the first of these premises is true with respect to blacks but not with respect to Hispanics and that the second is not true with respect to blacks or Hispanics. The end result with respect to Hispanics is that the segregation of U.S. schools is little different from what it would be if there were no private schools.

Catholic schools enroll about half as high a proportion of blacks as the public schools, and other private schools only about a quarter as high a proportion. Internally, however, the other private sector is least racially segregated and the public sector by far the most segregated. The end result of these two opposing forces, between-sector and within-sector, is that the segregation of black and white students in U.S. schools is no greater and no less than it would be if there were no private schools, and their students were absorbed into the public sector, distributed among schools as public sector black and white students are now distributed.

4. Private schools do not provide the educational range that public schools do, particularly in vocational and other non-traditional courses or programs.

The evidence on this premise is that it is correct. Schools in both the Catholic and other private sectors provide primarily academic programs and have few vocational or technical courses. Even in academic areas, however, some of the smaller schools in the other private sector have a limited range of subjects, as evidenced by the fact that 44 percent of students in the other private sector are in schools with no third-year foreign language courses. The lesser educational range of the private sector is also shown by the more comprehensive character of the high-performance public schools compared to the high-performance private schools.

5. Private schools have a narrower range of extracurricular activites, and thus deprive their students of participation in school activities outside the classroom.

This premise is almost the direct opposite of premise 7 on the other side, so the answer is the same as was given there. Students in Catholic and public schools show about the same amount of participation in extracurricular activities, while students in other private schools show more, and participation is higher for seniors than for sophomores Thus this premise is not correct.

6. Private schools are unhealthily competitive, and thus public shcools provide a healthier affective development.

The report provides no direct evidence on this premise, but the indirect evidence suggests that something like the reverse is true for the comparison between the other private and public schools. Self-esteem and fate control are both higher in other private schools than in public schools, and the sophomore-senior gain is greater.

7. Facilitating the use of private schools aids whites more than blacks and those better off financially at the expense of those worse off; as a result, it increases racial and economic segregation.

An examination of the predicted effect of a $1,000 increase in income for all income groups shows that this would increase the proportion of blacks and Hispanics in the private sector, as well as the proportion of students from lower income families. Because a tuition tax credit or a school voucher would even more greatly facilitate private school enrollment for students from lower income families relative to students from higher income families, we can expect that either of those policies would even more greatly increase the proportion of blacks or students from low-income backgrounds in the private sector (primarily in the Catholic sector). If either of these policies failed to increase the proportion of blacks or students from low-income families in private schools relative to that in the public schools, then, overall, either of these policies would provide greater financial benefit to whites than to blacks, or to higher income than to lower income families, because of the tuition reductions for parents of those students currently enrolled in the private sector. If one considers only new entrants into the private sector, the evidence from the hypothetical experiment, together with the fact that a tuition tax credit or voucher plan would likely be more progressive in its effect than a $1,000 increase in income, indicates that blacks, Hispanics, and low-income families would differentially benefit. To consider the educational rather than the financial benefits means to consider only the new entrants into the private sector, for it is only their education that would be changed thus blacks and Hispanics would differentially benefit educationally.

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The evidence indicates that facilitating use of private schools through policies of the sort described above would not increase segregation along racial or economic lines but would decrease it (though the evidence indicates that religious segregation would increase). Such policies would bring more blacks, Hispanics, and students from lower income backgrounds into the private schools, thus reducing the between-sector segregation, and these students would be moving from a sector of high racial segregation to a sector of low racial segregation, as well as from a sector slightly higher in economic segregation to one slightly lower.

Additional results relevant to the policy question of facilitating or constraining use of public schools:

1. At middle and higher income levels, the increase in probability of enrollment of blacks with increase in income is higher than that of whites. At virtually all income levels, both the probability of enrollment of Hispanics and the increase in that probability with income are higher than for non-Hispanic whites. Comparing Catholics with Catholics and non-Catholics with non-Catholics shows that blacks have the highest absolute rate of enrollment in Catholic schools, at low as well as high income levels and among both Catholics and non-Catholics, while Hispanics have the lowest rate. In other private schools, black enrollment is low at all income levels except the very highest.

2. Catholic schools more nearly approximate the "common school" ideal of American education than do public schools, in that the achievement levels of students from different parental educational backgrounds, of black and white students, and of Hispanic and non-Hispanic white students are more nearly alike in Catholic schools than in public schools.

In addition, the educational aspirations of students from different parental educational backgrounds are more alike in Catholic than in public schools. Comparing public and other private schools shows that students in other private schools with parents of differing education have greater differences in scholastic achievement, while public school students with differing parental education have greater differences in educational aspirations.

3. Important factors in bringing about higher scholastic achievement in private schools than in public schools are the greater academic demands and more ordered environment in the private schools (section 6.3). The evidence shows not only that the sectors differ greatly on these dimensions, but also that within the public schools students who are better disciplined and are in schools with more ordered environments achieve more highly.

It may or may not be useful to attempt to sum up the overall implications for the premises underlying policy arguments to facilitate or constrain the use of private schools. Some of the premises on each side are confirmed, some on each side are disconfirmed. It is hard, however, to avoid the overall conclusion that the factual premises underlying policies that would facilitate use of private schools are much better supported on the whole than those underlying policies that would constrain their use. Or, to put it another way, the constraints imposed on schools in the public sector (and there is no evidence that those constraints are financial, compared with the private sector) seem to impair their functioning as educational institutions, without providing the more egalitarian outcomes that are one of the goals of public schooling.